

You Can Pass the Spiritual Test!

Genesis 22:1-14

The other evening I was flicking through the channels on my television and there were a couple of programs that got me thinking. First of all I watched a couple of minutes of the NSW Schools' Spectacular! Do you know this event? You may've had your own children involved. It's a showcase of all the creative talent in our government schools; they've got a big choir, they have hundreds of dancers, and they also have some *soloists*. Now I get a bit nervous when I watch these young soloists because I start imagining what it must be like to be under the spotlight in a huge stadium with a live audience of hundreds and a TV audience of —let's be honest, probably not of millions—but certainly thousands. Will they nail it, or will they fall in a heap? I find myself getting nervous on their behalf!

When I couldn't stand it any longer I changed channels to the Cricket and I noticed that three new players were making their debut. And again I started to imagine what it would be like be walking in their shoes. I can't imagine being anything but nervous! You see before you play at the national level you play in the Sheffield Shield, and no-one watches the Sheffield Shield. But then you get called up and you're before big crowds, on the TV, people are wondering whether or not you really have the goods! I get very involved watching TV; I start worrying about people's performance. I think it's because I know that *I hate being tested*, I hate having my performance put under pressure and so I start to have these feelings of sympathy for the people on the screen.

But as much as I find testing an uncomfortable experience, we all know that it's a reality of life. You can't do any study without being tested. We have our health tested all the time. And it's also true that we worship a God who is testing us. 1 Thessalonians 2:4 the Apostle Paul talks about how one of his aims is to not try and please people but to please God who tests our hearts. Why does God test us? Is it because he is unsure of our love? Is it because he wants to earn his love? It's because of neither of those reasons. If he was unsure of our love he wouldn't be the all-knowing God, and If he wanted us to earn his love then he wouldn't be the God of grace. Rather God has some very positive reasons for putting us through our paces. James 1:3 tells us that the testing of our faith produces perseverance. And then James encourages us to let perseverance finish its work so that we may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. God tests us to strengthen our faith, to deepen our maturity as believers.

I think there are a number of ways that a Spiritual test can achieve this. We can be strengthened by failure; failing a test might need to ask serious questions about why we failed, about how we might be in a position to do better next time. But a test can also strengthen us if we do really well. When you pass a test you get a boost in confidence, don't you? You become hungry for the next opportunity to demonstrate your stuff. So tests can be very positive things; a positive experience leading to a positive outcome. I believe what we find in Genesis 22 is an example of a really

positive test, even though it's another one of those passages that's hard to comprehend. In this story Abraham receives a test from God, and he emerges from it looking pretty good. When God next comes to test us—and he will—how might we ensure that it's a positive experience? Abraham's example can show us how.

Genesis 22 beginning at verse 1. Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

So here's the test, and what a test it is! Isaac is the son that Abraham and Sarah had waited 25 years for. In the previous chapter Abraham's other son, Ishmael, he's been sent away with his mother, so Isaac is the only son left. But even if Isaac was one of many sons it would still be an unbelievable thing to hear: *Go and sacrifice your Son*. Notice how in v2 God refers to Isaac in four different ways: Your Son, your only son, the son whom you love, Isaac. Isaac has become more than simply an heir, more than a fulfillment to a promise. This young man is an object of love, he is a person with a name and a personality, and God commands his Father to sacrifice him as a burnt offering.

If this command of God seems incomprehensible, then perhaps Abraham's response is even more bewildering. Verse 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. *Early the next morning*; there is simply no *hesitation* from Abraham as he sets out to fulfill this command that God has issued. There's no *delay* as he cuts just enough wood for the offering, there's no *detour* as he makes his way to the region where God has sent him.

Compare this response to the *loooong* discussion Abraham has with God in ch 18. God has told Abraham that he's going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham pleads for the cities by appealing to God's own character. Surely this was the time for a very similar conversation: *Surely Lord you are not one to go back on your promise of a Son. You even named him Isaac; this is the one you promised. Why would you have me sacrifice him?* But we get no argument, we hear no complaint, rather in dutiful silence Abraham sets out to fulfill what was requested.

What is going on here? Is it the case that both God and Abraham have turned into violent monsters? I don't think so. I think there's a little hint in verse 5 as to what Abraham is actually thinking. Follow along from verse 4: On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship *and then we will come back to you*." Abraham seems very confident that Isaac will make the return journey. He seems to suspect that God has some kind of plan, even though all he's received at this point is the command to sacrifice.

I think it helps if we understand this chapter in the context of the whole story. This is the final sermon in our series looking at Abraham, and so it's a story that comes towards the end of Abraham's life, A life where God's goodness and God's faithfulness and God's kindness have been proven to Abraham again and again and again. So Abraham has reached a point where he no longer thrown by God's actions. *You want me to sacrifice my son? The one through whom your promises will be fulfilled? Ok, but I am sure that there's going to be more to the story, Let's see.*

Wouldn't it be great to reach a point where our response is similar? It's an unavoidable fact that God will test us, because as Hebrews tells us, God tests and disciplines those he loves, and God loves us. The test might come as God takes away something or someone that you love. The test might come when an opportunity emerges at work (or at Christmas) to say something about what you believe. The test might come when you are reading your Bible and you are convicted that there is a sin in your life that you need to turn away from. The test might come as you wait year after year for a blessing from God just never comes into sight. These are all opportunities to demonstrate that our faith is dependable; Opportunities to strengthen our faith as we take faltering steps in obedience.

Abraham's example teaches us to cast a look back over our lives. To ask ourselves: When has God been faithful in the past? When has God surprised us through actions that were unexpected? If he was working for our good back then, then surely he's working for our good in the present. I think that's how Abraham passed the test; He's drawing on the experiences that come with a long life of following God. It's the kind of journey that Isaac is just starting. As we pick up the story from verse 6 I want to switch our focus from Abraham to Isaac, to put ourselves in the young man's shoes for a few moments. Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.

We note that Father and Son are pictured walking towards the mountain together, We're given that image in verse 6 and again in verse 8. This is Father and Son time. I have very clear memories of Father and Son time growing up. Most often it involved playing sport of some description: kicking a football around, Dad bowling countless overs to me in the summer months. I'm very thankful it never included an activity like this! It's a fascinating conversation between Father and son in verses 7 or 8, isn't it? Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Isaac knows what's needed for a sacrifice, and he can see what's missing. Furthermore, it's possible that Isaac knew about child sacrifice as it was a common enough occurrence in this part of the ancient world. Isaac never asks the question directly but we are left with the impression that he's starting to put two and two together and that he knows that he might have a bigger role to play than that of simply carrying the sticks. Abraham answers his son in verse 8: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. Is this response an attempt by Abraham to settle his son, to not make a scene before the act can take place? I don't think so. I think Abraham genuinely believes that God is going

to provide an animal, such is his faith that God's promise will prevail, such is his faith that Isaac will not be taken from him.

Verses 9 and 10 are a masterful piece of story-telling. Every action is drawn out in detail, almost as if the action is being relayed in slow motion, ramping up the tension: When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. Was there any point at which Abraham thought God was going to take his son? Even in these final seconds, did Abraham ever start to think that God actually wanted to take Isaac away? Not according to the writer to the Hebrews. In Hebrews 11:19 we're told that even if Isaac was to be killed, Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead and that Isaac would somehow be brought back to life. It's a picture of complete faith in God's goodness, of complete trust in God's plans, of complete obedience to God's commands. And it's a faith that's demonstrated by one generation to another.

One of the things that we find most offensive in this passage is the idea that Isaac would be exposed to such a horrific experience. But it would be a very memorable lesson for Isaac about God's provision, and about the confidence we can have in following his commands. Up until recently I was serving on a school council and one of our aims was to provide a safe environment for our students. But I noticed that the teachers were also concerned about a lack of resilience within the student body. It was felt that by protecting the students from difficulties they were being denied the opportunity to grow out of those experiences. It's a hard balance to strike isn't it? And I admit that the example we have in Genesis 22 is quite extreme, but the story did make me reflect on the value of experiencing God in action, even when the experience might be uncomfortable.

How many of you would be comfortable doing what the Ongs are doing in Malawi? Raising their three young children in a developing country, in schools with far fewer resources than our own? Missionaries often describe how people ask "How can you do it to your kids?" The answer is that many missionary families are having wonderful experiences of God's goodness and of God's actions in the world. When we were expecting Theo our obstetrician revealed to us that he grew up as a missionary child in PNG. He described his childhood as *idyllic*. How disadvantaged we he growing up with this experience? If his chosen profession is any measure of disadvantage then we'd have to reply "Not very!"

At the very least, don't be afraid to demonstrate to your child your own faithfulness. Let your children see and understand your decision to put God first. Let them see your weekly commitment to church. Let them see your support of mission work. Let them see you pray expectantly. Let them see your obedience to what you read in the Bible. Isaac witnessed all of this first hand from his father, and then with his father he is present when God provides the missing animal and as God proves once more that he can be trusted in all that he asks of us, Verse 11 But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ¹² "Do not lay a hand on the boy,"

he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." ¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

What does Isaac witness? The provision by God of a substitutionary sacrifice. As he lies there, bound on the altar, waiting for the knife to fall, the faith-lesson experienced by Isaac is capped off as he hears the angel intervene and as he catches a glimpse of the ram that God provided as his substitute.

Of course there are echos of the ministry of Jesus here in this story. Jesus would one day become a sacrifice given so that we might be spared, and the place of both these sacrifices is the same (even though they are many years apart); Moriah is the region where Jerusalem is located. And the lesson is the same for us as it would have been for Isaac. If you want the clearest evidence that God is merciful, that his plans are worth sticking with, then take a look at the substitute that he has provided for us. The death of Christ teaches us that we are precious to God, that he has purchased us and given us new life that he wants us to live. I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. (Phil 3:12). The cross tells us that God has a hold of us, and so that ought to give us confidence whenever we face a trial. We know we are precious, we know where we are going, and so we can walk boldly towards whatever God places in front of us.